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A SUNDAY-SCHOOL RITUAL.

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THE suggestion that a Sunday school may properly have a ritual will be received by some minds with suspicion and alarm, as though it were proposed to bring the school into bondage to unedifying forms. Let the fearful reader remember that a ritual is in fact just an order of conducting public worship, whether voluntarily adopted or prescribed by authority. The familiar routine of "opening exercises"—transacted with slipshod negligence, or with seriousness and dignity—is the ritual of the school. Inquiry, therefore, concerning a ritual, on the proper method and order of these opening exercises, is always pertinent.

Nor is "A Sunday-School Ritual" at all a novel topic. The use which the superintendent shall make of the fifteen minutes he controls has been much debated in conventions and teachers' meetings. Publishers of lesson helps began long ago to furnish, together with the exposition of the lesson for teacher and pupil, an "opening service" for the guidance of the superintendent. Two denominational publishing houses at least supply little manuals containing a collection of "orders of worship" for Sunday schools; and similar "primary programs" may be found in print. It cannot be said that attention has not been given to the subject.

It does not appear, however, that the matter has received from our Sunday-school leaders in general the attention it deserves. The common neglect of many of the "orders" offered is not surprising, since they cannot always be conveniently carried out with no other aid than that of the Bible and the hymn-book in use. It must be said of them, too, that they are often somewhat elaborate and artificial in construction, and press too far the theory that unity of thought should control the

entire exercise. It does not seem desirable, for example, that the worship preceding a lesson on the parable of the Good Samaritan should persistently anticipate that theme in the selection of the Scriptures read and the hymns sung. And let the lesson be what it may, worship has given place to instruction, if the "order" calls upon the superintendent, after the singing of a hymn, to say, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die;" to which the associate superintendent shall respond, "For the wages of sin is death," and the pastor continue, "And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift." This collocation of texts carried still farther in the "order," quoted by librarians and Bible classes, is impressive, and in its place instructive. It is plainly out of its place, however, at the beginning of the session of the school. But it does not follow that the opening exercises must be conducted carelessly or perfunctorily, because this or the other ready-made "order" is impracticable or for any reason unsatisfactory. An opportunity to teach indirectly most important lessons concerning thankfulness, dependence upon God, reverence, the uses of Scripture as an aid to devotion, has been quite thrown away if the school arrives at the lesson of the day through an order of worship conducted in a helter-skelter and slovenly fashion. Let pastor and superintendent see to it that the school has its ritual, carefully thought out, sufficiently flexible, easy of execution, attractive and dignified. When a ritual has been prepared, and after deliberation adopted, let it be in fact as well as name the order for the regular sessions of the school; an order not to be arbitrarily set aside, and not to be seriously modified without plain justification. This accepted form of procedure will sometimes prove of great value in protecting the school from the vagaries and the ineptitudes of a well-meaning, but ill-instructed leader; and the most experienced superintendent will be grateful for its discipline and support.

No wisdom is adequate for the framing of a ritual which shall be always and everywhere fitting and acceptable. But the principles which should govern the framing of every such ritual are obvious enough, if only it is remembered that it is a ritual primarily for worship which is to be set forth, and not for the

entertainment of children who must be coaxed into attendance upon the school. That need does, indeed, sometimes exist. Recognize it frankly. Discard all ritual. Live from hand to mouth. Do from moment to moment what will hold the attention of your tumultuous assembly.

But when it is the case of a school properly so called, assembled for the study of the Bible, these principles must be held clearly in mind :

1. The worship of the Sunday school should be congregational. In the reading of the devotional Scripture selection the school should have an equal share with the leader. To every prayer the school should respond with an audible amen. The hymns chosen should be within the musical reach of the voices of young people. A prejudice still exists in some quarters against the responsive reading of Scripture in the worship either of the church or the school, as likely to offer encouragement to the merely formal and perfunctory use of the Bible. As a matter of fact, however, this method proves in practice admirably adapted to secure the attention of children and their participation in the service with intelligence and interest. It will be profitable in many cases to include in the order of congregational worship the recitation by the school of a psalm from a selection memorized for this purpose.

2. The worship of the Sunday school should be prevailingly objective. By its means attention should be continually turned to the great facts and fundamental truths of Christianity, rather than to the subjective experiences of Christian believers. Its prayers, in simple and unadorned language, should express the common need, thanksgiving, and faith. Doctrinal and hortatory hymns should be rarely, if ever, used in the Sunday school. In the devotional meetings of the church those "sacred songs" which utter the rapturous joy or the overwhelming contrition of more mature disciples must hold their place ; but sober consideration of the religious attainments of the members of our Sunday schools decides against the employment of them there. Would that sober consideration might oftener be given to this matter ! When we ask young people and children to sing the ardent,

mystical, heart-piercing words which are the necessary and inevitable expression of the ecstatic emotion of a religious revival, we are incurring the very grave charge of encouraging the use of unreal words. Nothing is gained by the kindling of religious emotion if sincerity and reverence be lost. Nor is a reverent exercise necessarily dull and sad. It may be glad in its spirit, while it is serious, and quite as interesting and uplifting, even to the minds of children, as though it were made "lively" by flippancy words and a familiar manner.

3. The distinction should always be recognized in our Sunday-school ritual between worship and instruction. Praise and prayer in the Sunday school are not an "opening exercise," of significance only as an introduction to the lesson, but are an independent function of the school, having their own importance and their own claim to attention. Preparation for the conduct of the school when engaged in this duty should be as carefully and conscientiously made as preparation for the teaching of the lesson. The maintenance of this distinction between what is done as worship and what is done as instruction will make for simplicity, directness, and effectiveness. To worship, of course, belong the hymn, the devotional Scripture, read or recited, the prayer. To instruction belong the reading of the lesson from the desk, with or without comment, the review and application of the lesson from the desk, the class instruction, the singing which has for its end the making acquaintance with new music. It is true enough that worship often blends insensibly with instruction. We are learners while we offer praises, and we lift up our adorations while we study revealed truth; but a distinction nevertheless exists, and in general it can be recognized.

In the framing of a Sunday-school ritual, then, provision will be made for both worship and instruction. Most frequently the service of worship will have the first place in time. The following order omits all detail that can be readily supplied, and it is constructed without reference to a particular lesson theme.

I. THE SERVICE OF WORSHIP.

1. *A hymn.* Preferably of general praise, and never new to the school.

2. *Devotional Scripture.* Read responsively. (The division of the responsive reading between pastor, superintendent, boys, girls, whole school, is a device which loses all value when the novelty is lost.)

3. *The Gloria Patri.* All standing.

4. *Prayer.* Concluding with the Lord's Prayer.

5. *A hymn.*

The Scripture reading may properly be in two portions, from the Old Testament and the New, if time permits, divided by another hymn.

II. THE SERVICE OF INSTRUCTION.

6. *Reading of the Scripture.* The lesson for the day, or a passage confirmatory and illustrative of it, with very brief comments.

7. *A sentence prayer.* For the blessing of God upon the work of teachers and pupils. Offered by the leader and repeated by the school. All standing.

8. *The lesson.*

9. *The lesson hymn.*

10. *Lesson review.* Or brief address on the lesson topic from the desk.

11. *Dismissal hymn and prayer.*

No provision is made in this order for notices, collections, distribution of library books. These things may be conveniently disposed of in most cases after No. 8. If time must be used in the drilling of the school in new hymns, let this exercise follow the lesson.

Should the reading of the Decalogue or the recitation of the Apostles' Creed be made a part of the Sunday-school ritual? In some schools they are used, and, it is thought, with profit. But they belong rather to the worship of the church.

It would be easy so to modify the ritual here offered as to put the service of instruction first. Sunday-school workers here and there are beginning to ask whether something would not be gained by that change.